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The Gift of Language

By Theodore Dalrymple

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Now that I've retired early from medical practice in a slum hospital and the prison next door, my former colleagues sometimes ask me, not without a trace of anxiety, whether I think that I made the right choice or whether I miss my previous life. They are good friends and fine men, but it is only human nature not to wish unalloyed happiness to one who has chosen a path that diverges, even slightly, from one's own.

Fortunately, I do miss some aspects of my work: if I didn't, it would mean that I had not enjoyed what I did for many years and had wasted a large stretch of my life. I miss, for instance, the sudden illumination into the worldview of my patients that their replies to simple questions sometimes gave me. I still do a certain amount of medico-legal work, preparing psychiatric reports on those accused of crimes, and recently a case reminded me of how sharply a few words can bring into relief an entire attitude toward life and shed light on an entire mental hinterland.

A young woman was charged with assault, under the influence of alcohol and marijuana, on a very old lady about five times her age. Describing her childhood, the young accused mentioned that her mother had once been in trouble with the police.

"What for?" I asked.

"She was on the Social [Security] and working at the same time."

"What happened?" I asked.

"She had to give up working." The air of self-evidence with which she said this revealed a whole world of presuppositions. For her, and those around her, work was the last resort; economic dependence on state handouts was the natural condition of man.

I delighted in what my patients said. One of them always laced his statements with proverbs, which he invariably mangled. "Sometimes, doctor," he said to me one day, "I feel like the little boy with his finger in the dike, crying wolf." And I enjoyed the expressive argot of prison. The prison officers, too, had their own language. They called a loquacious prisoner "verbal" if they believed him to be mad, and "mouthy" if they believed him to be merely bad and willfully misbehaving.

Brief exchanges could so entertain me that on occasion they transformed duty into pleasure. Once I was called to the prison in the early hours to examine a man who had just tried to hang himself. He was sitting in a room with a prison officer. It was about three in the morning, the very worst time to be roused from sleep.

"The things you have to do for Umanity, sir," said the prison officer to me.

The prisoner, looking bemused, said to him, "You what?"

"U-manity," said the prison officer, turning to the prisoner. "You're Uman, aren't you?"

It was like living in a glorious comic passage in Dickens.

For the most part, though, I was struck not by the verbal felicity and invention of my patients and those around them but by their inability to express themselves with anything like facility: and this after 11 years of compulsory education, or (more accurately) attendance at school.

With a very limited vocabulary, it is impossible to make, or at least to express, important distinctions and to examine any question with conceptual care. My patients often had no words to describe what they were feeling, except in the crudest possible way, with expostulations, exclamations, and physical displays of emotion. Often, by guesswork and my experience of other patients, I could put things into words for them, words that they grasped at eagerly. Everything was on the tip of their tongue, rarely or never reaching the stage of expression out loud. They struggled even to describe in a consecutive and logical fashion what had happened to them, at least without a great deal of prompting. Complex narrative and most abstractions were closed to them.

In their dealings with authority, they were at a huge disadvantage--a disaster, since so many of them depended upon various public bureaucracies for so many of their needs, from their housing and health care to their income and the education of their children. I would find myself dealing on their behalf with those bureaucracies, which were often simultaneously bullying and incompetent; and what officialdom had claimed for months or even years to be impossible suddenly, on my intervention, became possible within a week. Of course, it was not my mastery of language alone that produced this result; rather, my mastery of language signaled my capacity to make serious trouble for the bureaucrats if they did not do as I asked. I do not think it is a coincidence that the offices of all those bureaucracies were increasingly installing security barriers against the physical attacks on the staff by enraged but inarticulate dependents.

All this, it seems to me, directly contradicts our era's ruling orthodoxy about language. According to that orthodoxy, every child, save the severely brain-damaged and those with very rare genetic defects, learns his or her native language with perfect facility, adequate to his needs. He does so because the faculty of language is part of human nature, inscribed in man's physical being, as it were, and almost independent of environment. To be sure, today's language theorists concede that if a child grows up completely isolated from other human beings until the age of about six, he will never learn language adequately; but this very fact, they argue, implies that the capacity for language is "hardwired" in the human brain, to be activated only at a certain stage in each individual's development, which in turn proves that language is an inherent biological characteristic of mankind rather than a merely cultural artifact. Moreover, language itself is always rule-governed; and the rules that govern it are universally the same, when stripped of certain minor incidentals and contingencies that superficially appear important but in reality are not.

It follows that no language or dialect is superior to any other and that modes of verbal communication cannot be ranked according to complexity, expressiveness, or any other virtue. Thus, attempts to foist alleged grammatical "correctness" on native speakers of an "incorrect" dialect are nothing but the unacknowledged and oppressive exercise of social control--the means by which the elites deprive whole social classes and peoples of self-esteem and keep them in permanent subordination. If they are convinced that they can't speak their own language properly, how can they possibly feel other than unworthy, humiliated, and disenfranchised? Hence the refusal to teach formal grammar is both in accord with a correct understanding of the nature of language and is politically generous, inasmuch as it confers equal status on all forms of speech and therefore upon all speakers.

The locus classicus of this way of thinking, at least for laymen such as myself, is Steven Pinker's book *The Language Instinct*. A bestseller when first published in 1994, it is now in its 25th printing in the British paperback version alone, and its wide circulation suggests a broad influence on the opinions of the intelligent public. Pinker is a professor of psychology at Harvard University, and that institution's great prestige cloaks him, too, in the eyes of many. If Professor Pinker were not right on so important a subject, which is one to which he has devoted much study and brilliant intelligence, would he have tenure at Harvard?

Pinker nails his colors to the mast at once. His book, he says, "will not chide you about proper usage . . ." because, after all, "[l]anguage is a complex, specialized skill, which . . . is qualitatively the same in every individual. . . . Language is no more a cultural invention than is upright posture," and men are as naturally equal in their ability to express themselves as in their ability to stand on two legs. "Once you begin to look at language . . . as a biological adaptation to communicate

information," Pinker continues, "it is no longer as tempting to see language as an insidious shaper of thought." Every individual has an equal linguistic capacity to formulate the most complex and refined thoughts. We all have, so to speak, the same tools for thinking. "When it comes to linguistic form," Pinker says, quoting the anthropologist, Edward Sapir, "Plato walks with the Macedonian swineherd, Confucius with the head-hunting savage of Assam." To put it another way, "linguistic genius is involved every time a child learns his or her mother tongue."

The old-fashioned and elitist idea that there is a "correct" and "incorrect" form of language no doubt explains the fact that "[l]inguists repeatedly run up against the myth that working-class people . . . speak a simpler and a coarser language. This is a pernicious illusion. . . . Trifling differences between the dialect of the mainstream and the dialect of other groups . . . are dignified as badges of 'proper grammar.' " These are, in fact, the "hobgoblins of the schoolmarm," and ipso facto contemptible. In fact, standard English is one of those languages that "is a dialect with an army and a navy." The schoolmarm he so slightly dismisses is in fact but the linguistic arm of a colonial power--the middle class--oppressing what would otherwise be a much freer and happier populace. "Since prescriptive rules are so psychologically unnatural that only those with access to the right schooling can abide by them, they serve as shibboleths, differentiating the elite from the rabble."

Children will learn their native language adequately whatever anyone does, and the attempt to teach them language is fraught with psychological perils. For example, to "correct" the way a child speaks is potentially to give him what used to be called an inferiority complex. Moreover, when schools undertake such correction, they risk dividing the child from his parents and social milieu, for he will speak in one way and live in another, creating hostility and possibly rejection all around him. But happily, since every child is a linguistic genius, there is no need to do any such thing. Every child will have the linguistic equipment he needs, merely by virtue of growing older.

I need hardly point out that Pinker doesn't really believe anything of what he writes, at least if example is stronger evidence of belief than precept. Though artfully sown here and there with a demotic expression to prove that he is himself of the people, his own book is written, not surprisingly, in the kind of English that would please schoolmarms. I doubt very much whether it would have reached its 25th printing had he chosen to write it in the dialect of rural Louisiana, for example, or of the slums of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Even had he chosen to do so, he might have found the writing rather difficult. I should like to see him try to translate a sentence from his book that I have taken at random, "The point that the argument misses is that although natural selection involves incremental steps that enhance functioning, the enhancements do not have to be an existing module," into the language of the Glasgow or Detroit slums.

In fact, Pinker has no difficulty in ascribing greater or lesser expressive virtues to languages and dialects. In attacking the idea that there are primitive languages, he quotes the linguist Joan Bresnan, who describes English as "a West Germanic language spoken in England and its former colonies" (no prizes for guessing the emotional connotations of this way of so describing it). Bresnan wrote an article comparing the use of the dative in English and Kivunjo, a language spoken on the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro. Its use is much more complex in the latter language than in the former, making far more distinctions. Pinker comments: "Among the clever gadgets I have glimpsed in the grammars of so-called primitive groups, the complex Cherokee pronoun system seems especially handy. It distinguishes among 'you and I,' 'another person and I,' 'several other people and I,' and 'you, one or more other persons, and I,' which English crudely collapses into the all-purpose pronoun we." In other words, crudity and subtlety are concepts that apply between languages. And if so, there can be no real reason why they cannot apply within a language--why one man's usage should not be better, more expressive, subtler, than another's.

Similarly, Pinker attacks the idea that the English of the ghetto, Black English Vernacular, is in any way inferior to standard English. It is rule-governed like (almost) all other language. Moreover, "If the psychologists had listened to spontaneous conversations, they would have rediscovered the commonplace fact that American black culture is highly verbal; the subculture of street youths in particular is famous in the annals of anthropology for the value placed on linguistic virtuosity." But in appearing to endorse the idea of linguistic virtuosity, he is, whether he likes it or not, endorsing the idea of linguistic lack of virtuosity. And it surely requires very little reflection to come to the conclusion that Shakespeare had more linguistic virtuosity than, say, the average contemporary football player. Oddly enough, Pinker ends his encomium on Black English Vernacular with a schoolmarm's pursed lips: "The highest percentage of ungrammatical sentences [are to be] found in the proceedings of learned academic conferences."

Over and over again, Pinker stresses that children do not learn language by imitation; rather, they learn it because they are biologically predestined to do so. "Let us do away," he writes, with what one imagines to be a rhetorical sweep of his hand, "with the folklore that parents teach their children language." It comes as rather a surprise, then, to read the book's dedication: "For Harry and Roslyn Pinker, who gave me language."

Surely he cannot mean by this that they gave him language in the same sense as they gave him hemoglobin--that is to say, that they were merely the sine qua non of his biological existence as Steven Pinker. If so, why choose language of all the gifts that they gave him? Presumably, he means that they gave him the opportunity to learn standard English, even if they did not speak it themselves.

It is utterly implausible to suggest that imitation of parents (or other social contacts) has nothing whatever to do with the acquisition of language. I hesitate to mention so obvious a consideration, but Chinese parents tend to have Chinese-speaking children, and Portuguese parents Portuguese-speaking ones. I find it difficult to believe that this is entirely a coincidence and that imitation has nothing to do with it. Moreover, it is a sociological truism that children tend to speak not merely the language but the dialect of their parents.

Of course, they can escape it if they choose or need to do so: my mother, a native German-speaker, arrived in England aged 18 and learned to speak standard English without a trace of a German accent (which linguists say is a rare accomplishment) and without ever making a grammatical mistake. She didn't imitate her parents, perhaps, but she imitated someone. After her recent death, I found her notebooks from 1939, in which she painstakingly practiced English, the errors growing fewer until there were none. I don't think she would have been favorably impressed by Professor Pinker's disdainful grammatical latitudinarianism--the latitudinarianism that, in British schools and universities, now extends not only to grammar but to spelling, as a friend of mine discovered recently.

A teacher in a state school gave his daughter a list of spellings to learn as homework, and my friend noticed that three out of ten of them were wrong. He went to the principal to complain, but she looked at the list and asked, "So what? You can tell what the words are supposed to mean." The test for her was not whether the spellings were correct but whether they were understandable. So much for the hobgoblins of contemporary schoolmarms.

The contrast between a felt and lived reality--in this case, Pinker's need to speak and write standard English because of its superior ability to express complex ideas--and the denial of it, perhaps in order to assert something original and striking, is characteristic of an intellectual climate in which the destruction of moral and social distinctions is proof of the very best intentions.

Pinker's grammatical latitudinarianism, when educationists like the principal of my friend's daughter's school take it seriously, has the practical effect of encouraging those born in the lower reaches of society to remain there, to enclose them in the mental world of their particular milieu. Of course, this is perfectly all right if you also believe that all stations in life are equally good and desirable and that there is nothing to be said for articulate reflection upon human existence. In other words, grammatical latitudinarianism is the natural ideological ally of moral and cultural relativism.

It so happens that I observed the importance of mastering standard, schoolmarmly grammatical speech in my own family. My father, born two years after his older brother, had the opportunity, denied his older brother for reasons of poverty, to continue his education. Accordingly, my father learned to speak and write standard English, and I never heard him utter a single word that betrayed his origins. He could discourse philosophically without difficulty; I sometimes wished he had been a little less fluent.

My uncle, by contrast, remained trapped in the language of the slums. He was a highly intelligent man and what is more a very good one: he was one of those rare men, much less common than their opposite, from whom goodness radiated almost as a physical quality. No one ever met him without sensing his goodness of heart, his generosity of spirit.

But he was deeply inarticulate. His thoughts were too complex for the words and the syntax available to him. All through my childhood and beyond, I saw him struggle, like a man wrestling with an invisible boa constrictor, to express his far from foolish thoughts--thoughts of a complexity that

my father expressed effortlessly. The frustration was evident on his face, though he never blamed anyone else for it. When, in Pinker's book, I read the transcript of an interview by the neuropsychologist Howard Gardner with a man who suffered from expressive dysphasia after a stroke--that is to say, an inability to articulate thoughts in language--I was, with great sadness, reminded of my uncle. Gardner asked the man about his job before he had a stroke.

"I'm a sig . . . no . . . man . . . uh, well, . . . again." These words were emitted slowly, and with great effort. . . . "Let me help you," I interjected. "You were a signal . . ." "A sig-nal man . . . right," [he] completed my phrase triumphantly. "Were you in the Coast Guard?" "No, er, yes, yes . . . ship . . . Massachu . . . chusetts . . . Coast-guard . . . years."

It seemed to me that it was a cruel fate for such a man as my uncle not to have been taught the standard English that came to come so naturally to my father. As Montaigne tells us, there is no torture greater than that of a man who is unable to express what is in his soul.

Beginning in the 1950s, Basil Bernstein, a London University researcher, demonstrated the difference between the speech of middle- and working-class children, controlling for whatever it is that IQ measures. Working-class speech, tethered closely to the here and now, lacked the very aspects of standard English needed to express abstract or general ideas and to place personal experience in temporal or any other perspective. Thus, unless Pinker's despised schoolmarms were to take the working-class children in hand and deliberately teach them another speech code, they were doomed to remain where they were, at the bottom of a society that was itself much the poorer for not taking full advantage of their abilities, and that indeed would pay a steep penalty for not doing so. An intelligent man who can make no constructive use of his intelligence is likely to make a destructive, and self-destructive, use of it.

If anyone doubts that inarticulacy can be a problem, I recommend reading a report by the Joseph Rowntree Trust about British girls who get themselves pregnant in their teens (and sometimes their early teens) as an answer to their existential problems. The report is not in the least concerned with the linguistic deficiencies of these girls, but they are evident in the transcript in every reply to every question. Without exception, the girls had had a very painful experience of life and therefore much to express from hearts that must have been bursting. I give only one example, but it is representative. A girl, aged 17, explains why it is wonderful to have a baby:

Maybe it's just--yeah, because maybe just--might be (um) it just feels great when--when like, you've got a child who just-- you know--following you around, telling you they love you and I think that's--it's quite selfish, but that's one of the reasons why I became a mum because I wanted someone who'll--you know--love 'em to bits 'cos it's not just your child who's the centre of your world, and that feels great as well, so I think--it's brilliant. It is fantastic because--you know--they're--the child's dependent on you and you know that (um)-- that you--if you--you know--you've gotta do everything for the child and it just feels great to be depended on.

As I know from the experience of my patients, there is no reason to expect her powers of expression to increase spontaneously with age. Any complex abstractions that enter her mind will remain inchoate, almost a nuisance, like a fly buzzing in a bottle that it cannot escape. Her experience is opaque even to herself, a mere jumble from which it will be difficult or impossible to learn because, for linguistic reasons, she cannot put it into any kind of perspective or coherent order.

I am not of the ungenerous and empirically mistaken party that writes off such people as inherently incapable of anything better or as already having achieved so much that it is unnecessary to demand anything else of them, on the grounds that they naturally have more in common with Shakespeare than with speechless animal creation. Nor, of course, would I want everyone to speak all the time in Johnsonian or Gibbonian periods. Not only would it be intolerably tedious, but much linguistic wealth would vanish. But everyone ought to have the opportunity to transcend the limitations of his linguistic environment, if it is a restricted one--which means that he ought to meet a few schoolmarms in his childhood. Everyone, save the handicapped, learns to run without being taught; but no child runs 100 yards in nine seconds, or even 15 seconds, without training. It is fatuous to expect that the most complex of human faculties, language, requires no special training to develop it to its highest possible power.

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